DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 293 325 FL 017 301

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TITLE Marketing Across Cultures: Learning from U.S. Corporate Blunders.
PUB DATE May 87
NOTE 16p.; In: Languages and Communication for World Business and the Professions. Conference Proceedings; see FL 017 281.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Body Language; *Business Administration Education; *Business Communication; *Communication Problems; Cross Cultural Training; *Culture Conflict; Higher Education; *Intercultural Communication; *Marketing; Social Values

ABSTRACT

Errors in judgment made in international marketing as a result of American corporate provincialism or cultural ignorance are chronicled, and ways to avoid similar problems in the future are discussed. The marketing blunders, which have been both expensive and embarrassing, include errors in language use and mistaken assumptions about cultural values. It is suggested that American companies' marketing plans should reflect greater sensitivity to such cultural elements as family, educational systems, language differences, religion, body language, physical contact, promptness, eating habits, social customs, gift-giving, and values associated with color. It is also emphasized that cultural values and emphases vary greatly among cultures. Cultural determinants to be analyzed in the preparation of marketing strategies include relevant motivations in the culture, characteristic behavior patterns, broad cultural values relevant to the product, characteristic forms of decision-making, appropriate promotion methods, and appropriate retailers and intermediary institutions for the product. Increased specialized training through multinational business and foreign language programs is recommended as critical to a strong United States position in international trade. (MSE)

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ED293325

Eastern Michigan University's Sixth Annual Conference on
Languages and Communication for World Business and the Professions
Ann Arbor, Michigan
May 8-9, 1987

"Marketing Across Cultures: Learning from U.S. Corporate Blunders

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May, 1987

FL017301

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MARKETING ACROSS CULTURES: LEARNING FROM U.S. CORPORATE BLUNDERS

Barney T. Raffield, III, Ph.D.

International divisions and multinational operations are all but standard now for the majority of U.S. corporations. Through the early years of U.S. involvement in international trade, many serious mistakes were made by American companies in their approach to and treatment of business and consumer communities overseas. These mistakes seemed to occur largely because of U.S. provincialism and ignorance of the importance of the language, culture, and values, of the countries in which American firms wished to transact business. The consequences of such errors were often losses of great amounts of both money and international goodwill.

This paper specifically focuses on a variety of mistakes which U.S. corporations have made in international trade with respect to language, culture, and values. The primary purposes of the manuscript are to review a number of the mistakes which were made and to examine what U.S. corporations can and should be doing toward becoming more effective in the global marketing of American goods and services.

Examples of U.S. Corporate Blunders in Global Marketing Efforts

Language Blunders

Many U.S. corporations have had difficulty crossing the language barrier, with results ranging from mild embarrassment to outright failure. Seemingly harmless brand names and advertising phrases can take on unintended or hidden meanings when translated into other languages, but such errors can make a marketer look somewhat like a buffoon to foreign consumers. The following are

some actual examples of language and translation errors made by U.S. corporations in overseas markets (Ricks, 1983).

When Coca-Cola first marketed Coke in China during the 1920s, it developed a group of Chinese characters which, when pronounced, sounded like the product name. Unfortunately, the literal translation of the characters was "bite the wax tadpole." Today, the characters on Chinese Coke bottles translate as "happiness in the mouth."

Several U.S. automobile manufacturers have had similar problems when their brand names crashed into the language barrier. Chevrolet's Nova translated into Spanish as no va--"It doesn't go." Subsequently, General Motors changed the name to Caribe, and sales increased. General Motors "Body by Fisher" slogan became "Corpse by Fisher" when translated into Japanese. Ford introduced its Fiera truck to a variety of Spanish-speaking countries only to learn that the name means "ugly old woman" in Spanish. Adding even more to this first mistake, Ford introduced its Comet automobile in Mexico as the Caliente, a Mexican slang term for "streetwalker." On the other hand, Rolls Royce avoided the name Silver Mist in German markets, where "mist" means "manure." Sunbeam, more unfortunately, entered the German market with its Mist-Stick hair-curling iron; and, as should have been expected, found that German women had little use or desire for a "manure wand."

One well-intentioned American corporation introduced its shampoo product to the Brazilian market under the name of Evitol, which unhappily for that company translates as "dandruff contraceptive" in Portuguese. Another American company had trouble in marketing Pet evaporated milk in French-speaking countries, where the word "pet" means, among other things, "to break wind."

Many of these language and translation errors were corrected quickly enough to cause little more than a temporary embarrassment and loss of sales and profits for U.S. corporations. However, many others were not caught and amended so quickly, and later led to many unforseen consequences involving more long-term loss of sales, profits, market credibility, and international goodwill. Today, the multinational company must carefully screen its brand names and advertising messages to guard against those which might damage sales, make the U.S. firm look silly, or offend potential customers in specific international markets.

Culture and Values Blunders

International marketers need to be aware of each market's cultural environment, in that culture generally refers to people sharing a distinctive heritage. This heritage teaches standards, language, lifestyles, and goals. A culture is inculcated, and very much like consumer attitudes, is not easily changed. Almost every country in the world has a different culture, and continental differences may exist as well. A U.S. firm unfamiliar with or insensitive to a foreign culture may try to market products and services that are unacceptable to or misunderstood by that culture (Evans and Berman, 1985).

The following represents a collection of cultural errors that American companies have made in overseas markets during the past few decades (Ricks, 1983; Helming, 1982; Kotler, 1986; and Klein, 1983). In Japan, photograph frames aimed at the office market have done poorly because photographs of a person's family are not kept on people's desks, which are viewed only as places of work. The Japanese place family photographs in albums and show them only to friends. Pepsodent was unsuccessful in Southeast Asia because it promised

white teeth to a culture where black or yellow teeth are symbols of prestige. In Quebec, a canned fish manufacturer tried to promote a product by showing a woman dressed in shorts, golfing with her husband, and planning to serve the canned fish for dinner; all these activities violated local cultural norms.

Additionally, Maxwell House advertised itself as a "great American coffee" in the Federal Republic of Germany, only to learn that West Germans have little respect for American coffee. In Brazil, Gerber Foods could not convince mothers that commercial baby food was a good alternative to food the mothers made themselves. Campbell Soup, also in Brazil, lost over 8 million dollars by failing to discover that the typical housewife in the subtropical areas of Brazil felt that they were failing to fulfill their roles as homemakers by not serving their families a soup that they had made themselves. Finally, African men were upset by an American firm's African-run commercial for a men's deodorant which showed a happy male being chased by beautiful women. The unfortunate result was that the African men felt that using the deodorant would make them weak and susceptible to being overrun by women.

In regard to the examples cited above, the errors wre often committed as a result of a lack of an awareness of foreign cultures that is rooted in inadequate data (Evans and Berman, 1985). In a number of cases the U.S. firm was at fault because it operated out of a domestic home office and received very little, if any, foreign input. In other cases, such as marketing in third-world countries, information has been limited due to a low level of population data (both demographic and psychographic), a severely limited expertise in marketing research strategies and techniques, and a reluctance on the part of the foreign nationals to participate openly and freely in market

surveys. In some instances, mail and telephone service are poor, limiting the ability of marketing researchers to determine the cultural taboos of certain markets; to understand the hidden meanings of specific brand names, slogans, and trademarks in specific international markets; to ascertain the typical or average rate of product or service consumption over time; and to analyze and evaluate the reasons for particular purchases in various international markets.

What Have U.S. Corporations Learned From Their Overseas Marketing Blunders?

Exactly what have U.S. corporations learned about languages and cultures from the rather embarrassing, not to mention frequently extraordinarily expensive, global marketing mistakes cited above. Greater and more sensitive cultural awareness, to include both primary and more subtle language differences, can be vastly improved in American firms through the development of a "master plan" through which the company will create an appropriate and effective marketing mix for each of the products and services which it wishes to market in a particular foreign country. Cultural awareness can be improved by employing foreign personnel in key positions, hiring foreign marketing research specialists, locating company offices in each country of operations, actively studying cultural differences, and being responsive to cultural changes (Evans and Berman, 1985).

The following represent some cultural elements that can influence a company's marketing program overseas, but it must be remembered that the importance of specific elements in marketing varies from country to country (Stanton and Futrell, 1987).

Family. In some countries, the family is an extremely close-knit unit; whereas, in other nations the family members generally act more independently. Each of these two types of situations requires a different type of promotion, and perhaps even different types of products.

Educational systems. The educational system affects the literacy rate, which, in turn, influences advertising, branding, and labeling. The brand may become all-important if potential customers cannot read and must depend on recognizing the article by the picture on the label.

Language differences. Language differences, as can be clearly seen above, also pose problems. Even some English words have different meanings in Great Britain, Australia, and the United States.

Religion. Religion is a major influence on value systems and behavioral patterns.

Specialists in international marketing research, whether domestic Americans or foreign nationals, can provide the U.S. firm with invaluable data on multinational differences in consumers throughout the world. For example, the following marketing problems can be easily created due to global cultural differences (Farrard, 1985; Business Week, 1976).

Body language. Standing with your hands on your hips is a gesture of defiance in Indonesia. Carrying on a conversation with your hands in your pockets makes a poor impression in France, Belgium, Finland, and Sweden. When you shake your head from side to side, that means "yes" in Bulgaria and Sri Lanka. Crossing your legs to expose the sole of your shoe is really taboo in Muslim countries. In fact, to call a person a "shoe" is a deep insult.

Finally, waving goodbye to someone in Korea is taken to mean that you are beckoning them.

Physical contact. Patting a child on the head is a grave offense in Thailand or Singapore, since the head is considered to be sacred. In an Oriental culture, touching another person is considered to be an invasion of privacy; while in southern European countries and in Arabic countries, it is interpreted as a sign of warmth and friendship.

Promptness. One should be on time when invited to dinner in either Denmark or China, but a host in a Latin-American country would be surprised if his/her guest arrived at the appointed hour.

Eating. It is rude to leave anything on one's plate when eating in Norway, Singapore, or Malaysia; while in Egypt, it is rude not to leave something.

Other social customs. In Sweden, nudity and sexual permissiveness are quite all right, but drinking is not. In Spain there is a very negative attitude toward life insurance because by receiving insurance benefits, a wife feels that she is profiting from her husband's death. Retailers in Taiwan embrace the concept of "scrambled merchandising." Here are some product combinations found in small shops: luggage and soap; fresh donuts and playing cards; purses, blanbkets, and toothpaste; and dresses, soap, and table lamps.

Giving of gifts and selection of color. In Brazil, purple is a death color, and scotch is more popular than bourbon. To the English, apparel and soap as gifts are considered too personal; and although white lilies suggest death, other types of flowers are very acceptable. In France, yellow flowers suggest infidelity, and chrysanthemums are strictly for funerals. Cutlery is

never given as a gift. In Hong Kong, white is for funerals, but red is popular in all Chinese-speaking cultures. Italians and West Germans feel that red roses are given to one's favorite woman, and handkerchiefs are not generally given as gifts in Italy. To Mexicans, yellow flowers are a symbol of death. In the Soviet Union, knives and forks are a friendship-cutter, as they also are in the Federal Republic of Germany unless the giver requests a coin in payment. in Saudi Arabia, it is wise to give nothing to another person's wife, and one should not give anything alcoholic to anyone. Finally, clocks should not be given as gifts to the Taiwanese because the word for "clock" sounds like the one for "terminate."

Toward the Development of Standardized Strategies for Marketing Across Cultures

It is imperative that U.S. firms learn more effective and more acceptable strategies for use in their global marketing efforts. As can be easily seen in the multitude of examples above, there are major and often contradictory cultural norms and values as one studies various cultures throughout the world. Is it even possible for the American firm which wishes to conduct business abroad to do so efficiently, tactfully, effectively, and quite importantly, profitably? During the last decade, numerous pieces of scholarly research have been conducted in an effort to provide an answer to this vital question. This particular paper will cite the results of two such studies completed by James Engel, Roger Blackwell, and David Kollat; and by Herbert Henzler.

An assessment of a country's culture for marketing purposes involves the analysis of its people's attitudes, motivations, perceptions, and learning

processes (Jain, 1987). The following information more specifically summarizes such cultural determinants (Engel, Blackwell, Kollat, 1978).

Determine relevant motivations in the culture. What needs are fulfilled with this product in the minds of members of the culture? How are these needs presently fulfilled? Do members of this culture readily recognize thes needs?

Determine characteristic behavior patterns. What patterns are characteristic of purchasing patterns? What forms of division of labor exist within the family structure? How frequently are products of this type purchased? What size packages are normally purchased? Do any of these characteristic behaviors conflict with the behavior expected for this product? How strongly engrained are the behavior patterns that conflict with those needed for distribution of this product?

Determine what broad cultural values are relevant to this product? Are there strong values about work, morality, religion, family relations, and so on, that relate to this product? Does this product connote attributes that that are in conflict with these cultural values? Can conflicts with values be avoided by changing the product? Are there positive values in this culture with which the product might be identified?

Determine characteristic forms of decision-making. Do members of the culture display a studied approach to decisions concerning innovations, or do they rely more on an impulsive approach? What is the form of the decision process? Upon what information sources do members of the culture rely? Do members of the culture tend to be rigid or flexible in the acceptance of new ideas? What criteria do they use in evaluating alternatives?

Evaluate promotion methods appropriate to the culture. What role does advertising occupy in the culture? What themes, words, or illustrations, are taboo in the culture? What language problems exist in present markets that cannot be translated into this culture? What types of salespeople are accepted by members of the culture? Are such salespeople available?

Determine appropriate institutions for this product in the minds of consumers. What types of retailers and intermediary institutions are available? What services do institutions offer that are expected by the consumer? What alternatives are available for obtaining services needed for the product but not offered existing institutions? How are various types of retailers regarded by consumers? Will changes in the distribution structure be readily accepted?

The questions asked above attempt to relate cultural traits to marketing decisions. For example, simply knowing about the social institutions, religion, and languag. differences, in a particular country is not enough. The global marketer who attempts to market across cultures must also understand what cultural impact, whether positive, negative, or both, his/her product or service will have on a specific country. Simply looking at an aggregation of individual facts and other specific forms of data, cannot replace the use of a systemic and carefully researched approach to the understanding of the marketing practices and taboos of various markets throughout the world.

In addition to Engel, Blackwell, and Kollat's cross-cultural analysis of consumer behavior detailed above, Henzler (1981) developed some standardized strategies for business firms to utilize in to utilize in their attempts to market across cultures. These strategies are organized according to the phase

One of the greatest assets which U.S. firms already have, and will continue to have, is the international training and knowledge of their employees. It will become even more increasingly important in the years ahead for any company wishing to market across cultures to attract, to motivate, and to retain young men and women specifically trained in the language, culture, politics, and economics of consumer and industrial markets throughout the world. Where then do these firms find such young people for positions in international marketing research, sales, product management, distribution planning, promotional strategy, and consumer relations? The most obvious answer seems to be found in those individuals who have received specialized training in multinational business and foreign language programs. It would be a comforting, but highly dangerous and unwarranted assumption for American business leaders to accept the notion that many such trained professionals currently exist in the United States. They, unfortunately for the United States, seem to be born, trained, and employed in other countries with whom we compete at this time. Very few U.S. colleges and universities currently offer such programs or plan to do so in the near future. It is becoming more abundantly clear as time passes and as the American business practitioner looks to past mistakes in global markets, that financial and placement support for academically and professionally trained individuals in multinational business and foreign languages are sorely and critically necessary to the United States in its quest for maintenance, expansion, and creativity in marketing acrosss cultures.

Table 1

Developing Standard Marketing Strategies

Phase	Developing	Take-off	Mature
Basic Strategy	Test Market Pursue profitable individual projects and/or export activities	Build Base Allocate substantial resources to establish leading position in market	Expand/Round off Operations Allocate resources selectively to develop market niches
Elements of Strategy			
Investment	Minimize (distribution and services)	Invest to expand capacity (relatively long payback)	Expans selectively in R&D, production, and distribution (relatively short payback)
Risk	Avoid	Accept	Limit
Market share	Concentrate on key projects; possibly build position in profitable businesses with local support	Extend base with --New products --New outlets --New applications	Expand/defend
Price	Price high	Aim for price leadership (at both ends)	Back stable market price level
Product	Standard technology, simple products	Aim for wide range, "innovator" role	Full product line in selected areas, products of high technical quality
Costs	Minimum acceptable (especially reduction of guarantee risks	Economies of scale, reduction of fixed costs	Rationalize; optimize resources

Table 1 (continued)

Phase	Developing	Take-off	Mature
Elements of strategy			
Marketing	Selective advertising --With typical high-prestige products --Aiming at decision-makers	Active utilization of selective marketing resources	Selected product advertising
Know-how transfer	Document know-how on reference projects	Use local know-how in --Product technology --Product engineering	Transfer know-how in special product lines; acquire local know-how to round off own base

Source: Taken from Herbert Henzler, "Shaping an International Investment Strategy," The McKinsey Quarterly, Spring, 1981, p. 77.

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